

Author retraces timeless landscapes, tangled histories

From the moment I first saw the cover of “From Cairo to Beirut,” I could hardly wait to delve into the book’s contents. This illustrated travel memoir by Redmond, Washington, author and illustrator Sunil Shinde covers the region that many know as the homeland of Judeo-Christian figures, more reductively in contemporary times, this is a region fraught with headline grabbing tension.

But Shinde, an India-born Hindu who came to the Pacific Northwest as part of the technology boom, offers a different perspective in this immensely accessible work that combines his interests in culture, history and religion, his passion for travel, and a more recent enthusiasm for sketching.

In 1839, Scottish artist David Roberts made a six month trek from Egypt to Lebanon, sketching temples, monuments, souks, caravans and landscapes before returning to the British Isles to produce illustrated plates

This week’s book

‘From Cairo to Beirut’ by Sunil Shinde
Chin Music Press – 256 pp — \$22.95

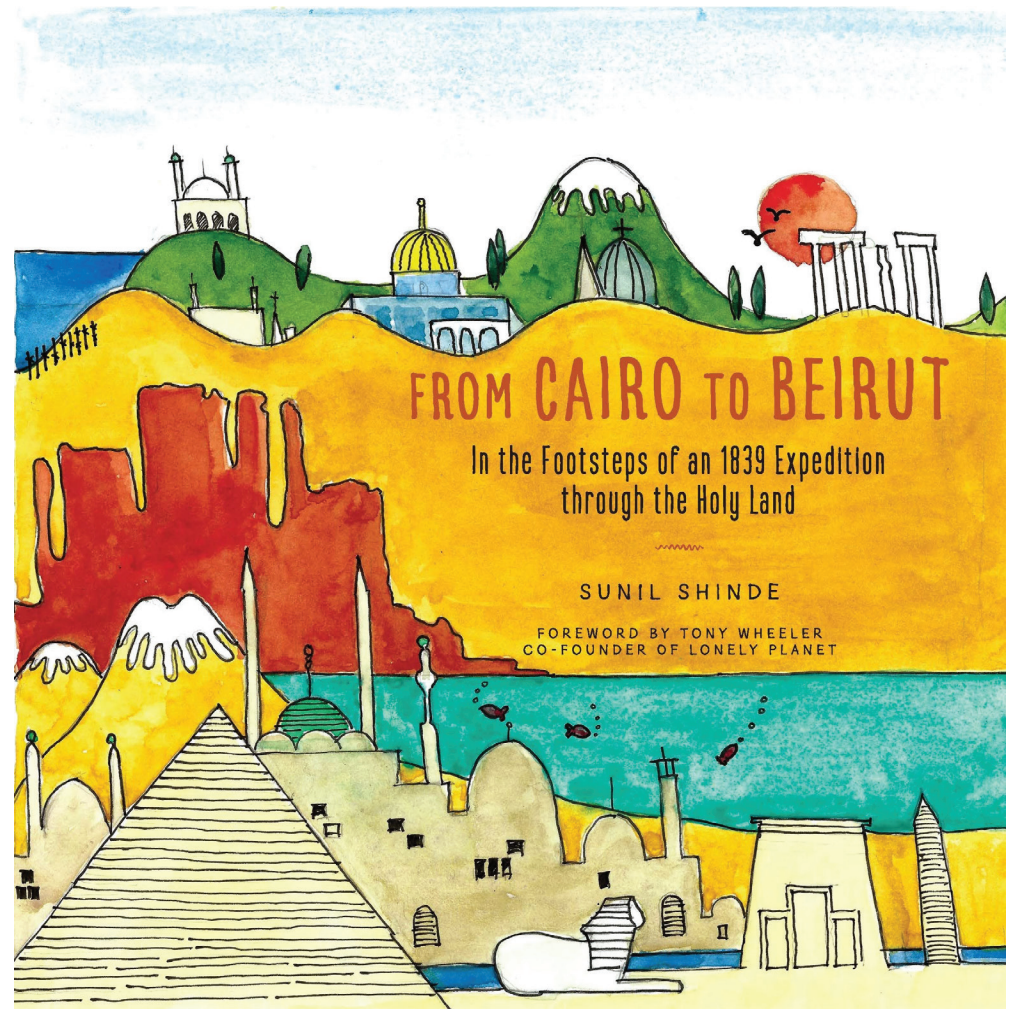
SHINDE’S BOOK ALSO SUPPLIES COMMENTARY, WHICH DEMONSTRATES NOT ONLY THE DEPTH OF HIS RESEARCH PRIOR TO THIS TRIP, BUT ALSO HIS CAPACITY FOR TAKING IN HIS SURROUNDINGS.

that became all the rage. Queen Victoria was one of his biggest fans.

Nearly two centuries later, Shinde retraces Roberts’ steps and captures the scenes in his own sketchbook. Some of what he sees along the way is astonishingly unchanged. From a historic bazaar in Cairo to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, where a ladder still leans against a second floor window of the church, precisely as it did in Roberts’ time.

Other spots show more evidence of time’s passage. Camels have been replaced by cars, historic buildings scarred with bullet holes from conflicts over the years, and some antiquities have been plundered or demolished by war.

Shinde’s book also supplies commentary, which demonstrates not only the depth of his research prior to this trip, but also his capacity for taking in his surroundings. The



‘From Cairo to Beirut: In the Footsteps of an 1839 Expedition to the Holy Land’ is by Sunil Shinde.

sights, of course, but also the smells, tastes and sounds, from Ed Sheeran’s voice crooning over the loudspeakers in a Beirut mall to the crack of a fighter jet cutting across the sky.

Accompanied by guides who help with interpretation and access, Shinde hopes to learn what people are thinking, how they are feeling. More than once, for example,

he hears people in the Arab world refer to Israel namelessly, as “another place” or “another country.”

This book includes 250 sketches by Shinde. The inclusion of another 25 lithographs by Roberts was a gutsy decision on the part of the author, for Roberts’ work exhibits fine art finesse while Shinde’s work is clearly more impromptu.

His human figures are particularly cartoon like. “I am not good at drawing people,” he confesses to one man who poses for him in Petra, Jordan. His subject, reviewing the results, agrees. And yet, Shinde’s work effectively captures the verve of contemporary life, and with bird’s eye view maps, phenomenal perspectives of Petra and Tyre, the work engages the imagination. “From Cairo to Beirut” is an excellent, mind-expanding read. I highly recommend it.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at barbaralmcm@gmail.com.

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